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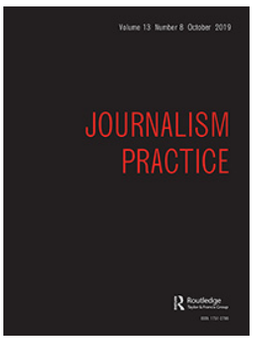

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Hero or Anti-Hero? Journalists and their Stories*

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By its nature, news focuses on unique occurrences—the latest details and newest revelations about what's going on in the world. But some news stories are extraordinary. They come at us in bold type on newspapers, flashing graphics on television, and now in interactive digital forms fueled by digital sources. They shock us when they come out, and leave us thinking differently about the world after we've encountered them.

These stories also pose new questions about what journalism can be in a digital age.

By their nature, journalists are rarely the subjects of their own stories. They are more often in the background, and we only know of a journalist's presence by their byline and an inherent recognition that *someone* did the work to report a story. But some news stories are extraordinary, and call for greater attention to those involved in the newswork behind the headlines.

These stories also draw attention to the journalists and their work in a digital age.

Among stories which are extraordinary and which called for extraordinary endeavor are those surrounding the massive troves of digital material leaked via WikiLeaks in 2010 and by Edward Snowden in 2013. In news built on these materials, there were explosive revelations, but also dramatic renderings of journalists working to report the stories which made "WikiLeaks" and "Snowden" household names. With WikiLeaks, journalists recounted the secrecy involved in working with Assange, and the expertise in making sense of WikiLeaks' releases. With Snowden, we were shown how encrypted emails and secret meetings in a Hong Kong hotel led journalists to their source, enabling the reporting on international surveillance that followed. These stories brought attention to the complex relationship between journalists and their sources, and to the boundaries between traditional journalists and new digital actors.

These dynamics were addressed in a study titled "Hero or Anti-hero?". In part an exploration of methodological approaches for examining journalistic identity and newswork in texts, this research showed news also provided a reassuring narrative, as journalists took these "extraordinary occurrences" and went about "reporting on them in a way that makes journalistic work appear competent to news media audiences" (Berkowitz 2000, 129). Its findings showed how news stories provide a public platform for journalists

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to make the case for their professions, their newswork, and their identities. It showed that while journalism is primarily about conveying information to a public, it is also part storytelling. And in the stories being told, journalists have a part to play.

Journalism as Performative Discourse

Theoretically, this sort of analysis considers journalism as a performative discourse (Broersma 2010), and news stories as locations where journalists display the power they have in society—such as their power to report and investigate facts, and the power news stories have in depicting society. Why is this particular performance important? The argument in favor of seeing news as journalism's performative discourses emphasizes the way journalists shape their identities around meeting the needs of the public. But it also considers how journalists need publics to see value in the news being produced. In maintaining this social contract between journalists and their publics, journalists need to demonstrate to an audience that their work is worth the investment (Conboy and Eldridge 2015).

This all comes together in news texts which offer narratives of newswork, reassuring us about the practices of journalism. For instance, as a public, we can assume that certain reporting practices occur because we see the results of that work in the news we consume. But without some aspect of a performative discourse, it is far harder to understand the specific work behind each story. It is also relatively easy to accept that journalists are engaged in evaluating different facts in order to produce news stories. But without that newswork being narrated to a public it is far harder to get an idea of what types of evaluations and decisions are being made, in whose interest, and—ultimately—why some decisions were made over others. Thus, performative discourses and narratives of newswork become critical in establishing a sense of understanding and value between the public and the journalists who see themselves as working in their interest. They also incorporate portrayals of how journalists *want* to be seen, as the "public-facing articulations" of their journalistic identity, often in ways which distinguish journalistic work from other types of communication (Eldridge 2018, 46).

Narratives of Journalistic identity

One way to explore these narratives is examining news stories through the archetypal structures of classical storytelling, addressing the subjects of news as characters in a narrative. Stories have heroes and villains. Heroes have ambitions, villains oppose them. Other characters come to the support of one side or the other and are able to use their power to help the hero, or aid the villain. You can examine not only who occupies which type of role, but also diagram the forces at play in these narratives.

Mapping this onto coverage of WikiLeaks and Snowden, Journalists take up a helper role, aiding the source in their ambition to get their information to the public. Pushing back against both journalists and sources are governments and politicians; not-quite-villains but nevertheless opponents of the desired journey. In these stories, journalists demonstrate that without their assistance, the public might not be informed. But they were not be so bold as to describe themselves the heroes of their own narratives—this

would fly in the face of expectations that journalists will keep some distance from the stories they tell.

This is the positive side of the performances of journalism found in news stories.

The flip side comes to the foreground when these performances elevate one narrative, while diminishing possible others. Most often, this emerges in stories which portray one "ideal" version of journalistic identity as the true reflection of what it is to be a journalist, while diminishing the contribution of other critical actors (especially digital actors whose work *also* conveys information to a public). This has been an undercurrent of reporting on and about digital actors, from WikiLeaks to Snowden and beyond (Eldridge 2018).

The reasons for this particular narrative are understandable, if not always agreeable (and beyond the scope of this paper). However, they remind us that new actors seen as edging into journalism's terrain provoke certain types of narratives which complicate the picture of journalism being presented. This was most obvious, perhaps, with WikiLeaks as it purports to be a new type of journalism. It also reflects a broader need to defend newswork and reporting on these stories as in a public interest, particularly as journalists were described as being reckless or unpatriotic. This was most obvious, perhaps, when then-editor of the *Independent* Chris Blackhurst denounced the *Guardian*'s reporting on Snowden's leaks (Eldridge 2018, 81).

Setting the debate over whether WikiLeaks is journalism and critiques about Snowden aside for the moment, the 2017 study showed that when confronted by the scale of digital revelations and their audacity, journalists effectively drew public attention to the work involved in reporting their stories. This allowed journalists to "perform" their work on a public stage in ways which reinforced their contributions to society, while also allowing them to stake a claim that they were even-handed in doing so: not the hero, nor the enemy, but some sort of anti-hero placed between different forces at play, as debates over what journalism practice looks like in this digital era roll on. It also sometimes came at the expense of others involved, dismissing their claims of journalistic identity (i.e., WikiLeaks' claims of being a new type of journalism).

In both positive and negative lights, journalistic identities are shown in these narratives to be composed of many things, including contradictions; balancing noble societal purpose, alongside a gritty "rat up the drainpipe" investigative fervor. This continues a familiar balancing act between an image of the journalist as public servant, not from "on high" but from the ground, and an image of the journalist-as-expert, demonstrating knowledge and authority in ways that give their journalistic voice weight, importance, and status. These narratives contribute to a new mythology of the journalist in a digital age, working with new skill sets but nevertheless resonant of our cultural expectations of journalists (Brennen 1995), where journalists are constantly, "making of themselves what they can, getting on and going on, each generation of journalists acquires the ethics of what Max Weber tells us […] is a highly ambiguous profession, now admired and applauded, now criticized and disparaged" (Inglis 2002, x).

Conclusion

As stories go, news stories are a particular type with particular narratives. They revolve around making facts public. While some characters are prominent, and others hide in the background, we are nevertheless made aware of the parts each plays. Viewing

news stories as narratives can help researchers unpack how journalists present themselves in relation to others in society. This approach also offers a lens through which journalists can reflect on the way their stories come across, and how they convey a certain picture of reality to audiences.

At a time when news comes at audiences from all directions, focusing on news as stories about both society and journalism can benefit a field of journalism which at times faces crises of recognition. Yet as with any story, news needs to resonate—the audience needs to care. And journalists should remain cognizant of their own power in constructing this picture of reality, not only in terms of how the events of any particular story are being narrated, but how journalists enter into their own stories.

This is also a storytelling that is increasingly complex, with characters stepping into and out of prominence and favorability in ways which show the stories of news are evolving narratives. We need look no further than coverage of the arrest of Julian Assange in 2019 to see this. Assange's arrest reinvigorated two debates. The first asks whether Assange is a journalist. As strongly as some people feel he is, others disagree. The second asks whether or not his arrest reflects a threat to press freedoms and journalism. As strongly as some people feel it does, others disagree. (And this only intensified when—at the time of this writing—the U.S. Justice Department added charges that Assange violated the Espionage Act to their extradition request.)

This complicates the picture of the "heroes" involved in making information public, and the "anti-hero" journalists involved in doing so. To wit, seeing Assange as a journalist could lead one to argue his arrest and extradition are a threat to journalism, yet arguing he is a journalist is not so simple, as what WikiLeaks has done (particularly in recent years) does not neatly fit how we have long understood journalism.

Thus, new details to the story reframe the debate over journalistic identities, newswork, and what it is to be a journalist nowadays. As Alan Rusbridger (2019), *Guardian* editor during the newspaper's time working with WikiLeaks, recapped: "Assange is a shape-shifter — part publisher, part impresario, part source, part activist, part anarchist, part whistleblower, part nihilist. And that new 21st-century creature: part journalist".

Both hero and anti-hero in our ongoing narratives of journalism and newswork.

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